Parallel modernization and self-colonization: Urban evolution and practices in Bangkok and Tehran

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ABSTRACT

This paper compares the urban evolution of two non-western primate capital cities, Bangkok and Tehran and the way their elites, through self-colonization, have adopted and implemented urban practices from more developed countries, perceiving them as their main path toward modernization. Urban history, morphology as well as implemented planning ideas and their impacts across the two cities are compared. The paper concludes that while these cities share many similar urban problems, their eccentricities and particularities are also important evidences of diverse, plural modernities.

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Introduction

"...I see [Eisenstadt's view of modernity] as one showing societies with effective citizen elites (and sometimes counter-elites) giving the ideals of modernity a working-over to merge with their own assumptions, and doing so with rather little self-consciousness about cultural difference... Moreover, the elites in question control overarching organizational machineries strong enough to make the influence of their understandings of modernity permeate the everyday conditions of life of ordinary citizens." (Hannerz, 1996, p.45)

This paper investigates the parallel urban evolution of two Asian cities, Bangkok and Tehran, during the process of modernization and engagement with the global economy. The paper discusses the particular characteristics, eccentricities of the two cities' urban history, morphology as well as their administrators' and planners' attempts through time to respond to the real and perceived problems that resulted.

The significance and underlying rationale for comparison is that the urban experiences of modernization and globalization of developing countries are often viewed in isolation against benchmarks adopted from urban practices in developed countries. 'Modernity' as a spreading civilization, implied in Hannerz's quotation above, reinforces this practice and there are gaps in knowledge in the relatively uncommon cross comparison studies between developing cities. The main premise for the specific selection of Bangkok and Tehran is based on their concurrent 'un-colonized' and elite-led 'self-colonization' phenomenon (amidst historical European colonial threat) that yielded specific, parallel urban experiences of modernization and modernity between the 18th to the 21st centuries.

Moreover today both primate capitals (Bangkok since 1782; Tehran since 1786) share many similar attributes and are the modern face of their respective societies that dominate the rest of the country economically, socially and culturally. They are mega-cities of similar population of over 10 million within their metropolitan regions, which is about 18% of Iran's population (Markaz-e Amar Iran, 1996) and about 16% of Thailand's (NSO, 2007, Table 1.3). Tehran accounts for more than 70% of Iran's economic financial resources (Statistical Organization of Iran, 2003, in Fanni, 2006). According to Costello (2001), Tehran's conurbation, one of Asia's fastest growing cities, expanded 25 times (from 20 km^2 to 500 km^2) between the late 19th century and 1980. In the same period Bangkok has expanded at comparable rates consolidating its status as Thailand's primate city—in fact, having 56% of the country's urban population at the end of the 20th century—the highest proportion of any capital city in the world (Askew, 2002, p.2).

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A framework for comparison: Cities and modernizations

This section discusses the main framework/conceptual model for comparison that utilizes the notion of 'modernization' and 'modernity'. Consistent with Askew (p.33), in this paper 'modernization' is defined as "…directed change (of which reform is a part)" while 'modernity', often a wide-ranging product of state modernization, is "…any attempts by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization…" (Berman, 1988, p.5).

Tehranian (1995, p.36–40) identified five stages of modernization from the 15th century onwards (since the birth of the Enlightenment) based on different forms of capitalism beginning with the first stage of "commercial capitalism" (1500–1700) associated with "…the rise of mercantile cities such as Venice, Florence, Barcelona, Paris and London". The expansion of these cities, characterized by their advanced technological and organizational capabilities for capital accumulation, led to the emergence of the nation–state system, the second stage of modernization (1700–1870) where, according to Tehranian, the "…ideology of this new political–spatial entity was nationalism and its ethos became 'the protestant ethic'". In the 19th century, a new imperialism emerged with the decline of the old empires, heralding the third stage of modernization (1870–1945) based on "…a new capitalist order driven by the search for new sources of raw materials, cheap labor and consumer market". Tehranian argues that the fourth stage of modernization (1945–present) begun with the rise of globalism at the end of World War II. While the conflict between the First World (i.e., the capitalist countries) and the Second World (i.e., the socialist countries) and the revolutionary parts of the Third World during the Cold War disrupted the mechanisms needed for such a global economic operation, globalism continued to grow in influence through the 'global reach' of the transnational corporations and the fostering of the culture of mass consumption. The rise of postmodernism and cyberspace as the spatial locus can be viewed as part of the transition from the fourth to the fifth stage of modernization ("Universalist localism" 1989–present).

Tehranian's five stages of modernization cohere with scholars such as Hegel, Habermas and Weber, who consider modernity as a Western product at its core. However, while globalization accelerated the global hegemony of Western ideas and modernization, it also led to the rise of different non-Western modernities (Hoodashtian, 2002, p. 62–66). The literature of non-Western urbanism and modernity embraces multiple areas of inquiry and incorporates varying standpoints. In general, two different approaches can be identified in terms of the way developing societies are studied in relation to Western modernization. According to Zubaida (2006) the 'sociology of absence' approach considers Western history as the core and a grid against which other histories and modernities can be read, presenting what other histories lacked rather than what they had. This is a legacy of colonialism that also problematized the study of defined cultures as a result of "…sensitivities about the danger of anthropology (once the handmaiden of European colonialism) constructing a post-colonial otherness of non-western peoples" (Askew, p. 7). An alternative approach, adopted by this paper, is to read modernization and the modernity of other societies in their own terms and to acknowledge the existence of multiple or "plural modernities" (e.g. Bonnett, 2005).

While there's an inevitable contemporary hegemony of developed economies' 'modernization' and 'modernity' as the benchmark (as reflected in Tehranian's five stages), the paper adopts a broad definition consistent with Askew and Berman above; the concept can be historically applied to and appropriated in non-Western cultures. Modernization is state-directed change that is often influenced by contact (e.g. through trade and geopolitical relations) with external cultures and is a process often concentrated in major urban centers. In this reading, modernization in the colonial era shifted to impose Western forms and practices from modernizations and modernities of more diffused origins. This paper dialectically articulates how the 'sociology of absence' approach to modernization influences the way the ruling and administrative elites of Bangkok and Tehran adopt and implement imported urban practices, perceiving it as their main path toward modernization, but yet having to constantly negotiate with pre-existing practices and patterns that continue to yield, it is argued, plural modernities.

Urban evolution and modernization in Bangkok and Tehran

While Bangkok's and Tehran's urban metamorphoses are highly complex phenomena that encompass virtually every field of study, this section focuses on these cities' stages of formal evolution which, despite their significant cultural and contextual differences, exhibited broad patterns in the way the threats and challenges of European colonization (imposed modernization) have been mitigated. Critically, although Thailand and Iran were never politically colonized, negotiations with the colonial powers led to parallel local elite-led processes of 'self-colonization' that selectively appropriated European modernization. It is observed that the negotiations progressed consistent with Tehranian's five stages of modernization, albeit imperfectly, and with significant divergences that defines multiple, local modernities – often in juxtaposition with modernity in the Western mould.

Indigenous mercantile walled cities with parallels to Tehranian's European-based first stage of modernization

In the pre-colonial era, the physical environment had been a major influence on the form of indigenous settlements. In this period, both were feudal walled cities ruled by absolute monarchs who also actively participated in trade, characterized by monopolies run by the nobility through the hierarchical patron-client system (Vichit-Vadakan and Nakata, 1976, p. 7; Wyatt, p. 168) in contrast to their European mercantile counterparts of the same period (Kathirithamby-Wells, 1993). It was through trade that they had contacts with Europeans – the Portuguese and the Dutch earlier on, followed by the British and the French.[1]

Early Rattanakosin Bangkok: Rama I–Rama III (1782–1851)

Bangkok was recorded on a Dutch navigation chart as early as 1642 as "*Banckock*" (Ginsburg, 2000, p. 20), a former farming and fishing village/trading post. In 1782, Bangkok was established by the new ruling Chakri dynasty to stabilize and restore the Siamese polity, shocked from the razing of the former mercantile center up-river of over 400 years at Ayutthaya (1350–1767) by the Burmese (Wyatt, 2003, p. 129–130). The city is known locally to Thais as *Krungthep*, the abbreviated version of a much longer auspicious and sacred name manifesting its role as the "symbolic nucleus of social order and culture" (Askew, p. 19). The first king, Rama I reigned over a period of ideological shift from the preceding dynasties which was "…expressed in a more explicit Buddhist moral foundation for kingly authority and more secular and cosmopolitan (or bourgeois) attitudes on the part of the elite" (Askew, p. 16 from Aeuosrivongse, 1984; Wyatt, 2003) which occurred at the expense of the Brahmanical model of 'god king' (*devarat*) with its links to the cult of Shiva worship (Askew, p. 19 from Rabibhadana, 1969, p. 43–44).

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[1] There have also been significant contacts between the courts of Ayutthaya and Isfahan, previous capitals of Siamese and Persian polities respectively – a research area that could shed more light to the pre-colonial local 'modernizations'.